

Sep-1989

Cultural Commentary: A Call for Senior Volunteerism

Genevieve Ash
Bridgewater State College

Recommended Citation

Ash, Genevieve (1989). Cultural Commentary: A Call for Senior Volunteerism. *Bridgewater Review*, 7(1), 22-24.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol7/iss1/12

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

A Call For Senior Volunteerism

By Genevieve Ash

Just twelve short years from now a new century will commence. Though we may not be able to predict a great deal about how we will live then we do know of at least three factors that will influence life in the 21st century — dramatic shifts in the demographic composition of our nation, the aging of our population and the spirit of volunteerism that is developing in the elderly community.

Statisticians, demographers, sociologists and the media are predicting an historically unprecedented population explosion of elderly persons. By the year 2025, it has been projected that the proportion of elderly people in the population will be about 17 percent. Recently, the *Alliance for Aging Research* forecast that the “baby boom” generation would be the healthiest and the longest-lived generation in history because of expected medical advances in gerontology.

But knowledge of population shifts alone does not recognize the unique character of the elderly. First, it is important to realize that the elderly are the most heterogeneous segment of the population characterized by special interest groups, diversities, distinct personalities, aspirations and objectives. Experts in the field of aging have had difficulty in categorizing older Americans by physical characteristics or in making distinctions such as between the young elderly, middle-aged elderly, or the old and the frail elderly. Older Americans defy definitions now and will continue to do so when the “baby boomers” reach their advanced years.

Secondly, aging is not a contagious disease, but a gradual slowing down process, a dynamic process encompassing complex bodily changes, a redefinition of social identities and an

adjustment in psychological function. Chronological age has little meaning, although it does serve as a convenient indicator, not only of psychological change, but of social status as well.

Thirdly, although financial security is paramount for a stress-free retirement and requires pre-retirement planning, there are other facets of the retirement state that should receive special consideration. In some instances, retirement can produce an identity crisis. This is true when a person's occupation becomes obsolete or when a person's profession, work, or vocation is closely associated with his personality. Unfortunately, there is not now, nor does there appear to be in the immediate future, a blueprint that a retiree can study. Without any psychological adjustment preparation, people tend to drift. In some instances, they succumb to stagnation and become hollow persons. On the other hand, many elderly citizens have found that lunches, poker, bridge, golf, fishing and travels are not enough to keep them intellectually alive and in the mainstream of life.

Alexis DeToqueville, the English political scientist, after his visit to the United States in 1832 wrote in his book *Democracy in America*, “I am persuaded,” he observed of America, “that the collective strengths of the citizens will always conduce more efficaciously to the public welfare than the authority of government.” This astute observation indicates that America was not exclusively a republic of political power, but a vast republic of *voluntary* values and actions that represent our real greatness. He also noted a tendency of Americans to unite with their fellows in organizations for a variety of purposes, such as professions, common

interest, religious denominations, and for mutual advantages.

The willingness of the elderly to serve could be used as a new approach to both old and new problems. It has been estimated by a Louis Harris Associates Survey that volunteerism would be increased by 10 percent if more information and support were available. At present, there is a shortage of volunteers, particularly among women between the ages of 25 to 65. Obviously, some of this is due to the extraordinary increase of women in the work force, the abolition of mandatory retirement in many industries and public institutions, flexible working hours, and part-time retirement. The tenor of volunteer work specifically for women has changed dramatically, but requires a great amount of time, dedication, sincerity, and a variety of marketable abilities.

It is usual for many seniors to belong to more than one elderly organization, one that is closely allied to their previous occupation or profession, and one that is more general in nature.

The following abridged list of older citizens' organizations with their brief descriptions were chosen as examples of the varieties and differences that exist among these organizations:

OWL (the Older Women's League) — works through its local chapters to bring about better lives for older women “by effecting change in public policy through the education of OWL members and policy makers at all levels to benefit the developing creative new forms of self-help, by changing the image of older women from pitiable and powerless to proud, self-directed and strong.”

The National Association of Retired Federal Employees — works through

local chapters to "protect the interests of all persons qualified under the Federal Government's Civil Service Retirement and Disability System." This organization has group insurance including health, accident, life, fire, homeowners, and automobile, and is available to its members.

The National Alliance of Senior Citizens — works through regional and state groups. The NASC brings together, "persons advocating the advancement of senior Americans through sound fiscal policy and through belief in the American system of individuality and personal freedom. Purpose is to inform the membership and the American public on the needs of senior citizens and of the programs and policies being carried out by the government and other specified groups."

The Silver-Haired Legislature — state organizations. The program goals are to "provide an educational advocacy program for seniors to become more aware of the legislative process, lobbying, community organizations and to encourage additional participation for senior leaders." Twenty-four states now have Silver-Haired Legislatures. In Massachusetts, any person over the age of 60 who is a registered voter and is a resident of the district he/she will represent is eligible to be a candidate for the Silver Haired Legislature. Elections are held every year, the tenure of office is for two years and elected members may run for reelection to succeed themselves.

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP/NRTA) — The goals of this organization were set forth by Dr. Ethel Percy Andrus in 1958: "To enhance the quality of life for older persons; to lead in determining the role and place of older persons in society; and to improve the image of aging." 27 million people divided by regions, chapters, and units comprise the membership. Membership is available to anyone 50 or over.

Big is not necessarily better, but as a result of the phenomenal growth of AARP, there are innumerable membership services and programs for which one may volunteer: consumer affairs, criminal justice, health advocacy services, housing institute of life long learning, inter-



Dorothy Vaughn works at Green Ave. Learning Center in Sayville, NY. She works with 10, 7 to 10-year-olds.

generational activities, reminiscences, tax aide, traffic and driver safety, and widowed persons' service. Each year, they have priority programs, such as a health care campaign, minority affairs initiative, women's initiative, and worker's equity.

AARP's media service includes the magazine, *Modern Maturity*, a Public Broadcasting television show, radio programs and newspaper column in major cities. They have a National Legislative Network which is involved in current national issues each as social security, deficit reduction, tax reforms, and medicine. There are also volunteer State Legislative Committees in each state which concentrate on such issues as health care cost containment, teacher and state employees pension coverage, and consumer rights.

In spite of the almost overwhelming number of pragmatic programs, AARP has not ignored the mystery of man nor

relegated him to human engineers or technocrats. Man's search for meaning, his inherent desire for wholeness, and his many dimensions are recognized by the organization's Inter-religious Liaison. *The National Interfaith Coalition on Aging* refers to this aspect of man, "as spiritual well being is the affirmation of life."

In 1985, John Denning, President of AARP, and the leadership conceived a program which they called *New Roles in Society* (Aging in the 21st Century). Briefly, the mission of this program is: "(to) respond to needs of all generations, to explore in a systematic way what the future holds for us, to identify trends, to take action that will help us to achieve a better society for all generations." Its major goals are delineated as follows: "to develop forecasts of changing conditions in the future which will influence the quality of American life to promote expanded



ACTION Photo

Theodore A. Harden, 63, of Staunton, VA, drives children to the Staunton Community Child Care Center.

opportunities for involvement of older persons in all spheres of life; and to promote options for people to pursue a wide range of activities."

For example, following through on the AARP program, it might be well to have the many non-profit organizations in each community form a consortium to examine the roles in which the elderly can serve as volunteers. Additional benefits of such a consortium would not only be the prevention of the many duplications of service, but a check on the proper utilization of elderly talents. Local governments should actively recruit older people for their volunteer town and city boards and committees. Personnel boards should be mandated to keep a list of eligible part-time workers available for the inevitable busy times of year. The Massachusetts General Court made a tremendous step in this direction when it passed Senate Bill 1728 in 1987 which provides for "the chairman of the county commissioners to appoint a senior citizen in his/her county to serve as an associate commissioner for affairs

concerning the elderly. The associate commissioner shall have no powers or authority in the county government, but will advise the county commissioners on affairs of the elderly and act as an ombudsman for senior citizens and elder agencies located within the county."

All levels of government need to reassess their elderly programs starting with the re-evaluation of the federal government's outsized, complicated categorical programs, which are wasteful and inefficient. The public is now aware of the number of ineligible people being served, the duplication of services and unnecessary funds that are appropriated. The reviewing should include all policies pertaining to women, to correct the inequities that now exist in Social Security, insurance, child care, and employment opportunities.

The older generation, their life-styles, contributions, and capabilities should be evaluated so that they will be properly appreciated as a continuing and untapped resource. As a result,

they can be kept in the mainstream of life by offering significant and needed help to all facets of society, but particularly to young people who are going through difficult periods of their lives, periods that the older person has survived. With the exception of an addiction to hard drugs, there is no problem that the older generation has not experienced. Thus, the life experiences, skills, talents, and cumulative knowledge of the graying population can be utilized to transmit the best of our culture.

No doubt there will be many institutions, associations, and organizations that will offer ideal opportunities to this older population who not only wish to stay in the mainstream of life, but would hope to participate in the exciting if dubious future. At the moment, however, AARP seems to be the elderly association striving to comprehend these critical issues, analyze them with an intergenerational approach, and act as a catalyst for remediation. ■